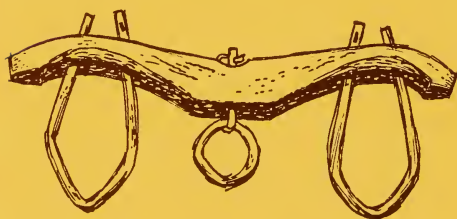


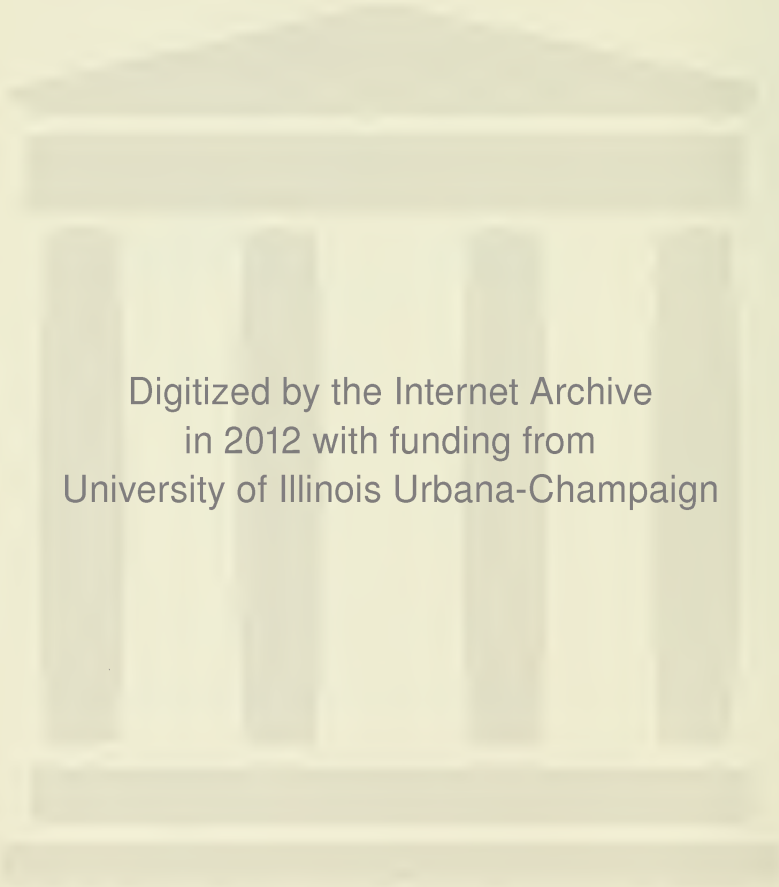
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A STUDY IN WORD POWER

BY

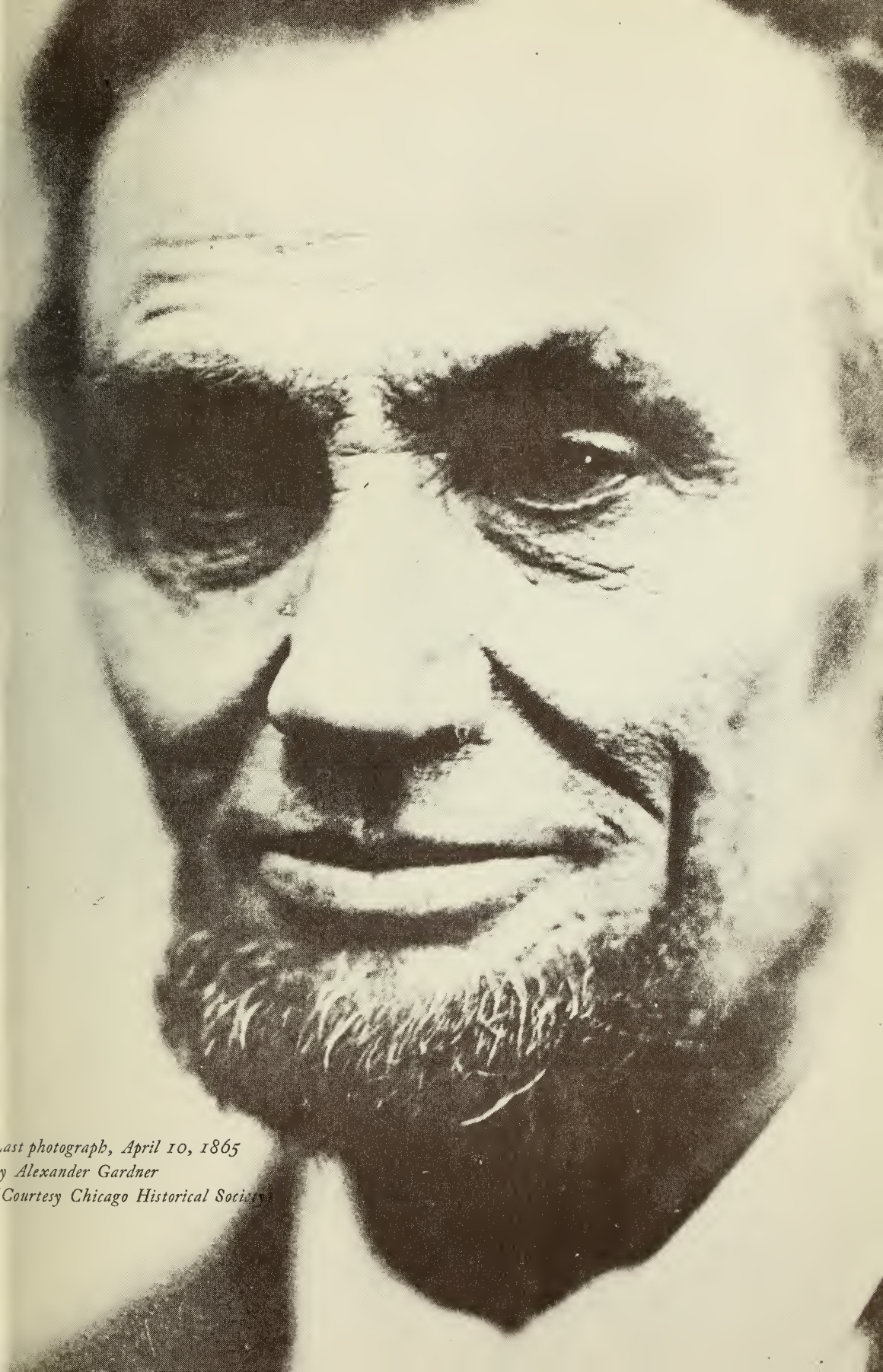
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LINCOLN'S IMAGERY

A STUDY IN WORD POWER

LOWELL MADE NO MISTAKE when he said that the secret of force in writing "lies not so much in the pedigree of nouns and adjectives and verbs, as in having something that you believe in to say, and making the parts of speech vividly conscious of it."

When one studies Abraham Lincoln's mastery of words, there is no difficulty in applying the first part of Lowell's aphorism. Lincoln had something to say that he believed in, and he said it with force. Hundreds of writers have showered his rhetorical power with friendly adjectives in their efforts to explain that force. He respected the meanings of words, and he wrote and spoke with clarity. He knew what he was talking about. He had consummate skill in logical analysis. He was able to put profound thoughts simply. He was sincere and earnest. He had both dignity and humor. He could rise to a lofty eloquence that has not been surpassed in the history of oratory. His language was pungent and he knew the art of timing. He was a master of balance and had an ear for rhythm. All this and more can be and has been said about his writing, but at the end we are far from unlocking the secrets

of his force, and we must consider the implications of the last part of Lowell's phrase. Lincoln patently succeeded in injecting the "parts of speech" with a vivid consciousness of what he had to say, and the question is, how did he do it?

The fundamental answer doubtless lies in the sum total of the man and his experience. Style may be the man, as Buffon has said, but even if this epigram is not wholly true, it is certain that style is not divorced from the man. Nor is the man divorced from his time and place. In Lincoln's case much of the lore of pioneer America was absorbed by the man as he lived his "prairie years" — and by an intelligence that remembered that lore down to its littlest details. It was gathered up, too, by a mind that grew through the prairie years in wisdom and in certain individual qualities that, as Paul M. Angle says, were faithfully mirrored in his words — notably his ruggedness, tenderness, tolerance, and humility. No study of Lincoln's style can fail to take account of the fact that this was a great man. Great men often leave a tantalizing residuum of mystery even after thousands of books and articles have been written about them, as is unquestionably true of Lincoln. Apparent simplicity may cloak subtlety and complexity. The fibres of great strength and character may be so many and tangled that to identify and untangle them calls for an understanding almost matching that of the subject under analysis, just as a perfect translation of a poem demands a poet as translator.

Granting that the speech and writing of Lincoln reflect the man in the full range of his talents and in the sweep of both his prairie and his presidential years, it remains true that one aspect of his words seems in special degree to have made the "parts of speech vividly conscious" of what he wanted to say. Benjamin P. Thomas puts his finger on it when he says that "the chief charm of Lincoln's writings is in the quaint and homely figures of speech with which they abound." He also refers to Lincoln's "knack of clarifying an idea by a vivid metaphor or simile," and he gives some

examples of the deft display of this knack.¹ Mr. Angle, probing Lincoln's power with words, similarly points to his "use of expressions, no matter how homely, which conveyed his exact meaning."² David K. Dodge, studying the evolution of Lincoln's style, touches on the man's imagination as reflected in his rich use of metaphor and simile, "usually taken from everyday experience."³ Roy P. Basler, refuting Parrington's ill-considered contention that Lincoln's style was "bare of imagery," finds that "the use of figures of speech is one of his most distinctive stylistic traits," that in fact Lincoln was "consistently and naturally figurative."⁴ These and other biographers are alert to the imagery of Lincoln in their analyses of both his literary style and his character, and to varying extents they draw upon the richness of illustrations recorded in his writings. No one, however, seems hitherto to have brought together in somewhat comprehensive fashion the figures of speech used by Lincoln, and that inviting task seems worth doing for more than one reason. The imagery assuredly helps to explain the charm of the Lincolnian style, but it does more. It illuminates Lincoln's power and persuasiveness in the use of words. It catches and reflects his curious interest in and knowledge of the world of everyday things about him. It is of some value as a sounding of the folk wisdom of pioneer America, particularly the earlier Middle West. And, viewed in its totality, it adds something to one's understanding of the intellectual and cultural resources of a central figure in the history of the modern world.

1. Benjamin P. Thomas, "The Individuality of Lincoln," *Lincoln Group Papers*, First Series, 87, 89 (Chicago, 1936).
2. Paul M. Angle, "Lincoln's Power with Words," *Abraham Lincoln Association Papers*, 80 (Springfield, Illinois, 1935).
3. David K. Dodge, "Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style," *University of Illinois Studies*, 1:25.
4. Roy P. Basler, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, 25 (Cleveland and New York, 1946). Mr. Basler's introduction to this compendium is one of the best essays that I have found on Lincoln as writer.

PUMPKINS IN THE BAG

The homely quality in the style of Lincoln owes not a little to his familiarity with the earthiness of pioneer farming, of soil and implements and animals and produce. Who but the prairie statesman could have said as President, after completing an irksome task, "Well, I have got that job husked out"?¹ Or what chief executive, discounting his influence in the arena of his war secretary, could have confessed, "I don't amount to pig tracks in the War Department"?² The swarming of greedy office seekers in pre-civil-service days occasioned a disillusioned and devastating verdict: "There are too many pigs for the tits."³

Lincoln did not scorn the saying that "broken eggs can never be mended,"⁴ but he adapted it in less conventional forms. In his last speech, he said, "Concede that the new government of Louisiana is only to what it should be as the egg is to the fowl, we shall sooner have the fowl by hatching the egg than by smashing it."⁵

1. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 3:414-15 (New York, 1939). In further notes citing this important and fascinating work, I shall use the title *War Years*. His earlier work, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years*, I have used in the one-volume edition published at New York in the Blue Ribbon Books in 1926. Both have been invaluable to me in the present study.
2. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:305.
3. Sandburg, *War Years*, 3:454.
4. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:306.
5. Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8:404 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953). The idea of studying the imagery of Lincoln came to me as a result of a booklet entitled *The Crowded Box-Room*, which I wrote in 1951, published by Emerson Wulling's Sumac Press in La Crosse, Wisconsin. With the aid of my editorial assistant, Zephyra E. Shepherd, I gathered up items and passages in Lincoln's writings and speeches from a wide variety of published sources. After my collection was well under way, Dr. Basler's magnificent and superbly edited eight-volume collection of Lincoln's works was published, and it seemed to me that it would be a convenience to readers if I tracked down and identified most of my items in this authoritative series of volumes. Hereafter they will be referred to as Basler, with the appropriate volume indicated. The one-volume compendium of 1946 will be cited as Basler, *Speeches and Writings*.

And he gave the egg metaphor a somewhat different turn when he urged that the Republican Party should not be "a mere sucked egg, all shell and no meat, the principle all sucked out."⁶ In yet another context he remarked, "Instead of settling one dispute by deciding the question, I should merely furnish a nest full of eggs for hatching new disputes."⁷

Rake, oxbow, and plow suggested usable figures to Lincoln's mind. As President he remarked of a Vermonter proposed for high position that he would need a good man "to rake after him." This was a compliment, for Lincoln added, "I can find men enough who can rake after, but the men with long arms and broad shoulders, who swing a scythe in long sweeps, cutting a swath ten feet wide, are much more difficult to find."⁸ In a political address he thus characterized the position compounded of support of the Dred Scott decision and unfriendly legislation to slavery by the territories: "The only effect of that position now is to prepare its advocates for such acquiescence when the time comes. Like wood for ox-bows, they are merely being *soaked* in it, preparatory to the bending."⁹ His judgment of the success of the Gettysburg address seems to have been doubtful. "Lamon," he is reported to have said, "that speech won't scour."¹⁰ The comparison was with a pioneer plow that could not "scour" because its mold board was heavy with wet dirt. In this case the figure was better than the judgment, for no speech has "scoured" more effectively than the one to which Lincoln referred.

In the campaign of 1856, writing a form letter to "Fillmore men," Lincoln worked out a political argument and then found a striking way of emphasizing its conclusiveness. "This is as plain," he said, "as the adding up of the weights of three small hogs."¹¹

6. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:306.

7. Basler, 5:516 — a letter of November 29, 1862, to Edward Bates.

8. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:299.

9. From Lincoln's notes for speeches in Columbus and Cincinnati in 1859. Basler, 3:431.

10. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:472. Mr. Sandburg explains clearly the precise meaning of Lincoln's phrase.

11. Basler, 2:374.

And of Judge Douglas at Jonesboro in 1858, he said, "I have no way of making an argument up into the consistency of a corn-cob and stopping his mouth with it."¹² Popular sovereignty, he once pointed out, "is to be dished up in as many varieties as a French cook can produce soup from potatoes."¹³ Salmon P. Chase's fruitless ambitions to reside at the White House Lincoln diagnosed by saying that Chase had a "Presidential chin-fly biting him."¹⁴ In an early address he spoke of the post office as not only cutting its own fodder, but even throwing a surplus into the Treasury.¹⁵ Of a speech stripped of trash and unnecessary words, he said that "all the chaff was fanned out of it."¹⁶ In a speech in Ohio he viewed a statement by Judge Douglas and found that since he "could clear it at a bound, it would be folly for me to stop and consider whether I could . . . crawl through a crack."¹⁷ At Springfield in 1858 Lincoln contrasted Douglas "of world wide renown," with himself. Politicians of Douglas' party, he suggested, looked upon him as a future President, and in "his round, jolly, fruitful face" they saw "post offices, land offices, marshalships and cabinet appointments, chargeships and foreign missions, bursting and sprouting out in wonderful exuberance." As to himself, nobody, he thought, expected him to be President. "In my poor, lean, lank face nobody has ever seen that any cabbages were sprouting out."¹⁸

Lincoln had a fondness for similes having to do with horses and oxen. One of his most famous was his modest and brief acceptance of renomination in 1864, in which he suggested that the people "have concluded that it is not best to swap horses while crossing the river, and have further concluded that I am not so poor a horse that they might not make a botch of it in trying to

12. Basler, 3:118.

13. From a speech at Springfield on July 17, 1858. Basler, 2:507.

14. Nathaniel W. Stephenson, *An Autobiography of Abraham Lincoln*, 401 (New York, 1926).

15. This passage is from Lincoln's subtreaury speech. Basler, 1:175.

16. The address at Columbus on September 16, 1859. Basler, 3:417.

17. This was in the Columbus address. Basler, 3:413.

18. Basler, *Speeches and Writings*, 406-407.

swap.”¹⁹ In the days of his spirited battles with Douglas he once compared the judge with the old woman who “trusted in Providence till the ‘britchin’ broke, and then . . . didn’t know what on airth *to* do.”²⁰ Suppose, he said in Chicago in 1858, Republicans endorse Douglas. Where then, he asked, do you stand? “Plainly,” he replied to his own question, “you stand ready saddled, bridled and harnessed and waiting to be driven over to the slavery extension camp of the nation . . . every man with a rope around his neck, that halter being held by Judge Douglas.”²¹ Writing of an anticipated stuffing of ballot boxes, he remarked, “It would be a great thing, when this trick is attempted upon us, to have the saddle come up on the other horse.”²² Douglas, he suggested, occasionally “squints at the argument” that controlling slavery by unfriendly legislation “may control it to death, as you might in the case of a horse, perhaps, feed him so lightly and ride him so much that he would die.”²³ Apropos of the Judge’s remarks on certain aspects of the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln said, “Driving a horse out of this lot, is too plain a proposition to be mistaken about; it is putting him on the other side of the fence.”²⁴ Great as is his interest in horses, he does not forget oxen. There was a certain wisdom in his thanks that the “good Lord has given to the vicious ox short horns, for if their physical courage were equal to their vicious dispositions, some of us in this neck of the woods would get hurt.”²⁵

19. This noted utterance appears in every collection of Lincoln’s writings. I have drawn it from Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 412.
20. This is perhaps less a figure than an anecdote — and it is one that has appeared on every American frontier. The speech of Lincoln’s is from 1852. See Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 100, and Basler, 2:150. In the present study, I have not attempted to review the great fund of Lincoln’s anecdotes, in part because the anecdote as such seems to play a relatively minor role in the Lincoln speeches. On the other hand the anecdotes unquestionably have an interest collateral to that of the imagery, and the reader is therefore referred to the admirable compendium edited by Emanuel Hertz under the title *Lincoln Talks, A Biography in Anecdote* (New York, 1939).
21. An address of July 10, 1858. Basler, 2:497.
22. In a letter to Norman B. Judd, October 20, 1858. Basler, 3:330.
23. The Columbus speech. Basler, 3:418.
24. Basler, 3:418.
25. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:239.

Telegraphing General Hooker in 1860 on the hazard of entanglement on the Rappahannock, Lincoln advised him to avoid the position of "an ox jumped half over a fence and liable to be torn by dogs front and rear without a fair chance to gore one way or kick the other."²⁶ And he could not resist saying, in one of his speeches, "I take that bull by the horns."²⁷

Lincoln was not unusual in his liking for figures of speech having to do with the harvest, and he employed them again and again. At the end of the senatorial campaign in 1858 he said, "The planting and the culture are over; and there remains but the preparation, and the harvest."²⁸ In the Civil War, when General Lee escaped after the battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln was melancholy. "We had gone through all the labor of tilling and planting an enormous crop," he said, "and when it was ripe we did not harvest it."²⁹

If the man had frustrations, he also had his triumphs. Sometimes, with difficulties overcome and the road clear, he could ride with balance and ease. "I have got a pumpkin at each end of my bag," he remarked when he had the resignation of Chase in his hands.³⁰

DRIVING IN THE PEGS

Lincoln had more than pumpkins in his bag. He had an almost inexhaustible fund of metaphors and similes out of the common things of life which, with what seems effortless ease, he drew upon to add vividness and clarity to his thoughts and arguments.

26. Quoted in Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 354.

27. The speech at Peoria, October 16, 1854. Basler, 2:265.

28. The final speech, in Springfield, October 30, 1858. Basler, 3:334. It is interesting to note that after the campaign, when he had lost the senatorship, he remarked, "I am after larger game; the battle of 1860 is worth a hundred of this." Ida M. Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2:111 (New York, 1908).

29. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:355.

30. J. G. Randall, *Lincoln the President*, 2:247-48 (New York, 1946).

Bears, dogs, other animals, and bees and birds often came to his mind as he sought telling comparisons. Douglas was, of course, the victim of his sharpest gibes. "I might as well preach Christianity to a grizzly bear as to preach Jefferson and Jackson to him,"¹ he wrote in notes for a speech in 1858. An item stricken from a bill in committee elicited the dry comment: "It is said that a bear is sometimes hard enough pushed to drop a cub, and so I presume it was in this case."² In an early address he ridiculed the attempts of biographers to make a military hero of General Cass, who, he said, "invaded Canada without resistance" and "outvaded it without pursuit." The General's friends were "tying him to a military tail, like so many mischievous boys tying a dog to a bladder of beans."³ When a group of visitors, after criticism of certain officials, suggested to President Lincoln that he should replace them with men whose loyalty, like their own, was unquestioned, he instantly replied, "Gentlemen, I see it is the same old, old coon. Why could you not tell me at once that you wanted an office, and save your own time as well as mine?"⁴ In mock alarm he taunted Douglas in a Chicago speech by saying that he is "not a dead lion, nor even a living one — he is the rugged Russian bear!"⁵

In the campaign of 1864 Grant made a characteristic decision that brought forth one of the most famous of Lincoln's picturesque sayings. "I have seen your despatch expressing unwillingness to break your hold where you are," wrote the President. "Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bulldog grip, and chew and choke as much as possible."⁶ Steam rams he thought could be very useful

1. Basler, 2:552.

2. Fourth joint debate, at Charleston, Illinois, September 18, 1858. Basler, 3:153.

3. From a speech in the House of Representatives in 1848. Basler, 1:509.

4. The story is told in Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:285.

5. The speech in Chicago on July 10, 1858. Basler, 2:485. Lincoln had many figures that came readily to mind when he thought of the problem of dealing with men whose imprisonment might be much more embarrassing than their escape. It was Jacob Thompson whom he referred to when he said, "When you have an elephant on your hands, and he wants to run away, better let him run." Hertz, *Lincoln Talks*, 370.

6. Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 425.

“to guard a particular harbor as a bulldog guards his master’s door.”⁷ In pre-presidential days he voiced his opinion of the Lecompton constitution by saying that it “should be throttled and killed as hastily and as heartily as a rabid dog.”⁸ During the war a telegram reporting that Union troops had fought the enemy to a standstill reminded the disappointed Lincoln of “two dogs barking through a fence, continuing their barking until they came to a gate, when both ran off in opposite directions.”⁹ In one of the debates with Douglas Lincoln found that he could not shake the Judge’s “teeth loose from the Dred Scott decision.” He then compared him with “some obstinate animal . . . that will hang on when he has once got his teeth fixed, you may cut off a leg, or you may tear away an arm, still he will not relax his hold.”¹⁰ As Thomas points out, Lincoln “continually thought of an army as an animal.”¹¹ In 1863 he wired advice to General Hooker: “If the head of Lee’s army is at Martinsburg and the tail of it on the plank road between Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the animal must be very slim somewhere: could you not break him?”¹² If the Army invited comparison with an animal, the Navy was “Uncle Sam’s Web-feet.” “At all the watery margins,” Lincoln wrote to James C. Conklin in 1863, “they have been present. Not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been, and made their tracks.”¹³ It was in the same letter that he epitomized a long chapter of history in ten words: “The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.” And it was this letter that caused John Hay, Lincoln’s secretary,

7. Quoted by Thomas, “Individuality of Lincoln,” 89.

8. Fragment of a speech in 1858. Basler, 2:450.

9. The circumstances are described by Sandburg in *War Years*, 2:241.

10. The debate at Ottawa, August 21, 1858. Basler, 3:28-29.

11. “Individuality of Lincoln,” 90.

12. Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 357.

13. Basler, 6:409.

to say of the man he frequently called "the Tycoon": "He can rake a sophism out of its hole better than all the trained logicians of all the schools."¹⁴

The figure of the cat's-paw is old, but Lincoln used it with unusual thoroughness in 1856 with respect to the then President of the United States. "By much dragging of chestnuts from the fire for others to eat," he said, "his claws are burnt off to the gristle."¹⁵

Lincoln introduced an extraordinary figure in a speech in Connecticut in 1860 apropos of the threat of dissolution of the Union. He pictured a man with a "poor old, lean, bony, spavined horse, with swelled legs." Asked what he was going to do with the horse, the owner said, "I'm going to fat him up; don't you see that I have got him seal fat as high as the knees?" Lincoln then made his point by saying, "Well, they have got the Union dissolved up to the ankle, but no farther."¹⁶

In 1858 he compared political antagonists to "boys who have set a bird-trap" and remarked that "they are watching to see if the birds are picking at the bait and likely to go under."¹⁷ The expression "lame duck" probably was not original with Lincoln as applied to politicians out of office, but in 1864 he suggested that a senator or representative "out of business is a sort of *lame duck*. He has to be provided for."¹⁸ Occasionally Lincoln employed figures of speech suggested by bees, as when, while reading at the White House, he said a crowd was "buzzing about the door like bees,"¹⁹ but his most unusual use of such a figure was a message to General McClellan in which, almost certainly thinking of bees'

14. William R. Thayer, *The Life and Letters of John Hay*, 1:200 (Boston and New York, 9th impression, 1915).

15. Fragment of a speech at a Republican dinner. Basler, 2:384.

16. The text is in Basler, 4:13.

17. Basler, 2:448.

18. Sandburg, *War Years*, 3:454. See Mitford M. Mathews, *A Dictionary of Americanisms*, 1:949 (Chicago, 1951), which refers to a use of the expression in the *Congressional Globe* for January 14, 1863.

19. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:312.

nests, he said, “. . . we shall ‘hive’ the enemy yet.”²⁰ Now and then he spoke of snakes. Among several illustrations, the most vivid is from a speech at Hartford in 1860, in which he drew an elaborate picture of rattlesnakes on the prairie and in a bed where children were sleeping. In the latter case he cautioned that in striking at the rattlesnake, one might strike the children “or arouse the reptile to bite the children.” And so he drew his moral, declaring that slavery “is the venomous snake in bed with the children.” Given a choice between killing the rattlesnake on the prairie or putting it in bed with children, he dismissed the matter by saying, “I think we’d *kill* it.”²¹ An impossible task he describes as an attempt “to penetrate the hard shell of a tortoise with a rye straw.”²²

Plants, food, housekeeping, and clothing furnished many ideas to Lincoln for adroit figures that saved him from lengthy expositions of reasoning. “Would you drop the war where it is?” he wrote to a Louisiana man who complained of the war’s interference with business. “Or, would you prosecute it in future with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water?”²³ Has anyone ever expressed in more damning phrase the futility of a half-hearted and ineffective conduct of a war? Acknowledging that he was not accustomed to flattery and it therefore “came the sweeter” to him, Lincoln in his first joint debate with Douglas compared himself with the Hoosier with gingerbread, who “reckoned he loved it better than any other man, and got less of it.”²⁴ One day in Washington Lincoln read through a high stack of telegrams and finally said, “Well, I guess I have got down to the raisins.” Explaining this curious remark, he recalled the little girl who loved raisins,

20. To General McClellan, July 5, 1862. Basler, 5:307. Leonard Volk reports another interesting “bee figure.” Objecting to “cut-and-dried sermons,” Lincoln said, “When I hear a man preach, I like to see him act as if he were fighting bees.” Hertz, *Lincoln Talks*, 77.

21. Basler, 4:10.

22. This is from the temperance speech before the Washingtonian Temperance Society at Springfield on February 22, 1842. Basler, 1:273.

23. The letter to Cuthbert Bullitt, July 28, 1862. Basler, 5:346.

24. Basler, 3:20.

ate too many of them and then gobbled other sweets. Soon she was sick, vomited, and finally the raisins came up. Gasping, she said to her mother, "Well, I will be better now, I guess, for I have got down to the raisins."²⁵ Many profound and many superficial arguments have been made on the question of a protective tariff. Lincoln summed the matter up by saying that it was a "question of national house-keeping. It is to the government," he said, "what replenishing the meal-tub is to the family."²⁶ Perhaps the most interesting of all his figures in relation to food and taste is his comment to a friend on the Presidency, at a time when the first nomination was more than a possibility. "As you request," he wrote Lyman Trumbull, "I will be entirely frank. The taste *is* in my mouth a little."²⁷

It would be strange if the eye of Lincoln had not noted in the clothing of the times the material for similes and metaphors to be stored away for later use. The platform of the Free Soilers he compared with "the pair of pantaloons the Yankee peddler offered for sale, 'large enough for any man, small enough for any boy'."²⁸ During the war he took note of an army division which "has got so terribly out of shape, out at elbows, and out at the toes, that it will require a long time to get it in again." A professor of English refers to this as an "inappropriate figure" but fails to explain why.²⁹ Did the critic realize that Lincoln was talking to a certain General McClellan, who needed even more than vivid language to prod him into action? Possibly Lincoln's figure was inappropriate, also, when, considering national expansion, he took into account the growth of population and the territorial limits of the

25. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:241.

26. The speech at Pittsburgh, February 15, 1861. Basler, 4:213.

27. Basler, 4:45.

28. Appropriately, the speech in which this picture was used was delivered at Worcester, Massachusetts. It was an early address, September 12, 1848, and the text, in Basler, 2:3, is drawn from the Boston *Daily Advertiser*.

29. The description occurred in a message to General McClellan. Basler, 5:272. The English professor was Dodge, in "Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style," 27.

time, and then said that it would be "as absurd to suppose that we could continue upon our present territory" as it would be "to hoop a boy twelve years of age, and expect him to grow to man's size without bursting the hoops."³⁰ But the argument, thus pictured, was unanswerable. Sometimes Lincoln's figures were mere pleasantries, but not the less interesting for that reason. A letter with a huge flourish of a signature caught his eye, and it reminded him of a "short-legged man in a big overcoat, the tail of which was so long that it wiped out his footprints in the snow."³¹

Thus the panorama of Lincoln's imagery unfolds. "Major Generalships in the Regular Army," he remarked when President, "are not as plenty as blackberries."³² The history of those who opposed the removal of slavery from American life was summed up by Lincoln in a sustained figure of speech that drew its inspiration from the era of candlelight. Of these people he wrote, "But I have also remembered that though they blazed, like tallow-candles for a century, at last they flickered in the socket, died out, stank in the dark for a brief season, and were remembered no more, even by the smell."³³ The figure is of a frontier historical piece with his allusion to the "advocates of a slave code," who, he said, would never attain mastery unless they got a sufficient number of recruits "toll'd in through the gap of Douglasism."³⁴ In his autobiographical sketch in 1860 he refers to an early store that got deeply into debt and then went out of business. But he does not say that it went out of business. What he does say is that "The store winked out."³⁵ The Prince of Joinville once asked him about his policy as President. He might have delivered a solemn speech on the direction of his statesmanship, but instead he thought of storms and tents. What was his policy? "I have none," he said. "I pass my life

30. From the debate with Douglas at Galesburg, October 7, 1858. Basler, 3:234.

31. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:241.

32. To Richard Yates and William Butler, April 10, 1862. Basler, 5:186.

33. A fragment from 1858. Basler, 2:482.

34. From notes for speeches in 1859. Basler, 3:431.

35. Basler, 4:65.

preventing the storm from blowing down the tent, and I drive in the pegs as fast as they are pulled up.”³⁶ When someone trespassed upon President Lincoln’s patience somewhat too long with advice about how to handle the presidency, the President replied, “Perhaps you’d like to run the machine yourself.”³⁷ Referring to the timing of the Emancipation Proclamation, he explained that he did not want “to issue a document that the whole world will see must necessarily be inoperative, like the Pope’s bull against the comet.”³⁸ Speaking of the oppressors of the Negro, he said, “One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key — the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places.”³⁹ Discussing agriculture and labor and voicing the doctrine that universal education is essential to free labor, Lincoln in an address at Milwaukee in 1859 described man’s head as “the natural guardian, director, and protector of the hands and mouth inseparably connected with it.”⁴⁰ Lincoln seldom drew ironical pictures touching love and marriage, but in 1856, in a banquet speech in Chicago, he said, “Like a rejected lover, making merry at the wedding of his rival, the President felicitates himself hugely over the late Presidential election.”⁴¹

Everybody knew about bullets and wars, and Lincoln was on familiar ground when he produced figures from this area of knowledge and experience. A position taken by Douglas he described as “simply an ambuscade.” “By entering into contest

36. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:304.

37. The story as presented by Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:237, was recorded by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

38. Lincoln’s reply to a memorial presented on September 13, 1862, by “Chicago Christians of All Denominations.” Basler, 5:420.

39. From a speech at Springfield in 1857. Basler, 2:404.

40. The address was given to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society on September 30, 1859. Basler, 3:480.

41. Basler, 2:384.

with our open enemies," he explained, "we are to be lured into his train; and then, having lost our own organization, and arms, we are to be turned over to those same open enemies."⁴² Famous is his offhand comment on the first debate with the Judge: "Douglas and I, for the first time this canvass, crossed swords here yesterday; the fire flew some, and I am glad to know I am yet alive."⁴³ That he was not greatly alarmed by the Senator may be seen from an earlier comment in a letter: "I write this, for your private eye, to assure you that there is no solid shot, in these bombastic parades of his."⁴⁴ Alongside the "principal assault" of Douglas, there are some auxiliary points, Lincoln said in a Springfield address, including "fizzle-gigs and fireworks" — the "little trappings of the campaign."⁴⁵ In one of the debates he compared the warring of Douglas with the way Satan wars upon the Bible.⁴⁶ A change of front calls forth the following comment: "Hence he is crawling back into his old camp, and you will find him eventually installed in full fellowship among those whom he was then battling."⁴⁷ After his defeat for the Senate, and looking forward to 1860, he wrote, "In that day I shall fight in the ranks."⁴⁸ In a speech of 1858, he remarked, "I do not understand that the framers of our Constitution left the people of the free States in the attitude of firing bombs or shells into the slave States."⁴⁹

His well-known play on the phrase "ballots and bullets" came in his first message to Congress, in the summer of 1861. Speaking of the South, he said, "It is now for them to demonstrate to the world, . . . that ballots are the rightful, and peaceful, successors of bullets; and that when ballots have fairly and constitutionally decided, there can be no successful appeal, back to bullets."⁵⁰

42. Basler, 3:429.

43. A letter of August 22, 1858, to Joseph O. Cunningham. Basler, 3:37.

44. To Gustav P. Koerner, July 16, 1858. Basler, 2:503.

45. Basler, *Speeches and Writings*, 408.

46. This was said at Alton on October 15, 1858. Basler, 3:305.

47. The speech at Freeport, August 27, 1858. Basler, 3:76.

48. A letter to N. B. Judd. Basler, 3:337.

49. Basler, 2:513.

50. Basler, 4:439.

One of Lincoln's friends urged him to bring an end to the daily attrition that he faced in meeting the thousands of people who swarmed to the White House. The President himself spoke of his "promiscuous receptions" in which "every applicant for audience has to take his turn, as if waiting to be shaved in a barber shop." Lincoln realized the tax upon his time and energy, but he said, "I call these receptions my *public opinion baths*" — and these, since he had "little time to read the papers," had an effect that he described as "renovating and invigorating."⁵¹

ENLIVENING THE PARTS OF SPEECH

One writer, perhaps with a view to emphasizing the undeniable originality and individuality of Lincoln, has maintained that, though he used some ordinary or commonplace comparisons, their number was small.¹ This claim is absurd, for Lincoln, without affectation, made use of any and all figures that happened to fit particular needs and occasions. Basler, in a memorable introduction to the speeches and writings of Lincoln, suggests that the figures used by Lincoln were of two kinds: those employed "as a method of explanation or a basis for drawing inference, and those which he uses as rhetorical assertions for purposes of persuasion." For both kinds, Lincoln's words afford a wealth of illustration, but such a classification, based upon conscious purpose, by no means tells the full story. For, as Mr. Basler also points out, "The implication of a purely utilitarian motive hardly does justice to Lincoln's imaginative quality of mind."² We know that he was interested in words, and an abundance of evidence shows that his

51. Sandburg, *War Years*, 2:236-37.

1. Dodge, "Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style," 28.

2. Basler, *Speeches and Writings*, 26.

mind reveled in pictures. Certainly he was too intelligent not to be aware of the impact of simile and metaphor on his hearers, and he was too able a debater to be ignorant of the fact that a metaphor, with its train of potential inferences, is not very easy to rebut. It is seldom that Lincoln himself discussed the use of figures of speech, but in one of his speeches in Congress in 1848, striking at the employment of "degrading figures," he said, "The point — the power to hurt — of all figures, consists in the *truthfulness* of their application."³ This statement, expressly recognizing the hurting effect of imagery used for the purpose of hurting, is revealing. But what is important to note is that his mind moved freely in the language of imagery. Inevitably, lacking false pride in words, he employed literally hundreds of figures of speech that were part of the common stock of the English language, and he did so with the naturalness of an agile mind that grasped all available instruments of clear and vivid expression. They have perhaps been overshadowed and little noted because so many of his similes and metaphors are stamped with his own individual flavor and accent. It should be of some interest, however, in any appraisal of his imagery, to take cognizance of the figures that, if unoriginal with him, he nevertheless used — and used frequently. Their interest lies not only in the fact that he relied on them in his speeches and writings, but also perhaps in the faithfulness with which they reveal customary habits of speech in the age in which he lived.

Illustrations are many, indeed. "We are not yet clear of the woods by a great deal," wrote Lincoln in a letter to E. B. Washburne in 1858. "Every edge must be made to cut," he said in another letter. The Judge, he suggested in a speech, "comes very near kicking his own fat into the fire." Lincoln speaks, in a variety of situations, of putting the foot down firmly, the ark of safety, the

3. Basler, *Speeches and Writings*, 241. Some further light on Lincoln's theory of speech is afforded in advice that he gave on one occasion to William H. Herndon. He urged "Billy" not to "shoot too high." With a lower aim, the educated people would still understand what was said, and Lincoln summed the whole matter up by adding, "If you aim too high, your idea will go over the heads of the masses and only hit those who need no hitting." Hertz, *Lincoln Talks*, 117.

“way the wind blows,” cutting knots, a “Babel of confusion,” a “tight rein,” singing “a different tune,” luring into a trap, a new “turn of the screw,” the “apple of discord,” the “jewel of liberty,” an “unexplored mine,” an effort “as idle as the wind,” a “Procrustean bed,” people cutting their own throats, getting rid of the fog, a “man of straw,” a “lever of power,” “stumbling blocks,” and “running the gauntlet.”⁴

Lincoln tells the Judge that he, the Judge, has “been through the mill.” In various places he speaks of “a chain of steel,” a “crumb of patronage,” “sucking the blood of genius,” wearing an idea threadbare, cooking up issues, handiwork woven in from warp to woof, beacons erected by the Fathers of the Republic, “pillars of the temple of liberty,” forging links of testimony, crowing over a defeat, checking a stampede, casting a mantle, the lamp of liberty, turning government back into a former channel, filling a niche, iron men, the “best timber,” knowing “there is fire whence we see much smoke rising,” the “lion of the day,” burying the hatchet, a political view “in its very best dress,” a dark political horizon, the “great Juggernaut,” dispelling the clouds on the horizon, weaving an idea into the general web of a discourse, the downhill track, the germ of a difficulty, “the rock on which you have split,” and political adherents “gathered from the four winds.”⁵

He does not hesitate to speak of the “great struggle of life,” galloping time, cramming a lie down a throat, pulling a string, “gone to pot,” a hard nut to crack, the country “in a blaze,” and of positions “where the shoe pinches” and “when our own toes are pinched.” He talks of having “Mr. Buchanan in the hollow of

4. Illustrations of the kind given above may be found scattered throughout the writings of Lincoln. For readers who wish complete documentation, however, the following citations are given in the precise order of the quotations in the paragraph to which this note is attached: Basler, 2:447, 2:524, 3:411, 4:237, 1:502, 1:477, 5:505, 5:416, 5:284, 3:450, 3:431, 3:424, 3:391, 7:243, 3:358, 3:355, 7:66, 3:349, 3:315-16, 3:311, 7:51, 3:79, 7:16.

5. Basler, 3:28; Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 211, 86, 41-42, 38; Basler, 2:549, 2:546, 1:115, 2:541, 2:537, 2:523, 2:519, 2:502, 2:501, 2:467, 2:499, 2:475, 8:77-78, 2:470, 2:455, 2:451, 4:160; Dodge, “Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style,” 27-28; Basler, 4:221, 4:126, 4:110, 4:83, 6:308, 2:468.

our hand." He asks, "What's in the wind?" The slavery question is the "great Behemoth of danger." He speaks of being in "good trim." He refers to "lost crumbs of last year." He asks a friend to "pump" somebody. He refers to people who are "hot on the track." He thinks of a time "when the storm shall be past." He asks, "Do we gain anything by opening one leak to stop another?" "Our republican robe," he declares in an Illinois speech, "is soiled, and trailed in the dust," and he asks that it be washed white. He talks of a strangling and casting "from us forever" of the "spirit of mutual concession." He alludes to the "knell of the Union" and a "deceitful cloak."⁶

The Missourians, Lincoln said in 1854, were "within a stone's throw of the contested ground." The Wilmot Proviso "stuck like wax." A "new light breaks upon us." A policy bears "rich fruit." Missouri "knocked at the door of the Union." Henry Clay "burned with zeal" and also shone "high in the heavens of the political world." Lincoln alluded to the "hard path of duty," and he understood, speaking of Zachary Taylor, that the presidency was "no bed of roses." In his eulogy of Henry Clay, he spoke of those "who would shiver into fragments the Union of these States." He liked to talk of the "miners and sappers" of despotism, of the Republican star, of having someone by the throat, and of the "tail of Douglas' new kite." "Squatter sovereignty" was "squatted out of existence" and "tumbled down like temporary scaffolding."⁷

All these and many more such items, some of them repeated again and again, can be culled from the Lincoln record. Taken alongside the imagery that is characteristically Lincolnian in its originality, they bear witness to a mind that, fed by long experience as a country lawyer and practice in the art of persuasion, understood the power of figurative language as a means of enlivening the "parts of speech."

6. Basler, 4:87, 4:103, 4:32, 4:24, 2:407, 2:406, 2:404, 2:374, 6:139, 2:358, 2:356, 2:270, 2:343, 2:317, 2:293, 2:292, 2:282, 6:311, 2:276, 2:272, 2:272, 2:454.

7. Basler, 2:271, 2:252, 2:250, 2:249-50, 2:128, 2:126, 2:125, 2:89, 2:89, 2:130, 3:375, 3:378; Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 383, 176; Basler, 2:464.

SMALL CURES FOR GREAT SORES

Lincoln recruited many of his metaphors and similes from experiences and areas universally familiar. Some of these were illness, pills, and plasters; games and races; and ships and the sea. In a speech at New Haven he referred to those who “have constantly brought forward small cures for great sores — plasters too small to cover the wound.”¹ In the debate with Douglas at Alton, he drove home a point by saying, “You may have a wen or a cancer upon your person and not be able to cut it out lest you bleed to death; but surely it is no way to cure it, to engraft it and spread it over your whole body. That is no proper way of treating what you regard as wrong.”² Repeatedly he pays ironical respects to Popular Sovereignty, and at Quincy he suggested that it had “got down as thin as the homeopathic soup that was made by boiling the shadow of a pigeon that had starved to death.”³ And after “the test of close reasoning,” not “even that thin decoction of it” was left. He objected to attempts to persuade him “that a particular drug is not good medicine for a sick man, because it can be shown to not be good for a well one.”⁴ At Galesburg he taunted Douglas with a prediction: “I see the day rapidly approaching when his pill of sectionalism, which he has been thrusting down the throats of Republicans for years past, will be crowded down his own throat.”⁵ In another address he mentioned the policy “the plausible sugar-coated name of which is ‘popular sovereignty’.”⁶

1. March 6, 1860. Basler, 4:15.

2. Basler, 3:313.

3. Basler, 3:279.

4. Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 357.

5. Basler, 3:224.

6. The speech at New Haven. Basler, 4:18.

In his first message to Congress, Lincoln considered the views of those who contended that a state could lawfully withdraw from the Union, without the Union's consent, and he then said, "with rebellion thus sugar-coated, they have been drugging the public mind of their section for more than thirty years."⁷ The government printer, one Defrees, regarded this as an "undignified expression," but Lincoln stuck to it. His decision to retain the word *sugar-coated* throws some light on his philosophy of speech. "That word expresses precisely my idea," he said, "and I am not going to change it. The time will never come in this country when the people won't know exactly what *sugar-coated* means!"⁸ Lincoln's judgment was sound. Many decades have passed, and the figure would still be understood, and instantly, by every American. But the interest of the episode lies not so much in the particular figure used as in the explicit recognition of the usefulness of a figure by Lincoln and his confidence in his own judgment as to the best wording for carrying his precise meaning to the people.

Lincoln understood the American liking for recreation — prize fights, cards, races, and fishing, for instance. "I can not enter the ring on the money basis," he declared in 1860.⁹ On one occasion he credited Senator Douglas with "clearing the ring, and giving slavery and freedom a fair fight."¹⁰ Now and then Lincoln touches fishing in his figures, but the subject is evidently not a favorite one. "Nor am I fishing for a letter on the other side," he writes in 1858.¹¹ Much earlier he refers to his stepmother, who "had a right of Dower," but, he adds to John D. Johnston, his stepbrother, "it seems she has already let you take that, hook and line."¹² Describing chained Negro slaves, he said they "were strung together pre-

7. Basler, 4:433.

8. F. B. Carpenter, *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House*, 127 (New York, 1868).

9. A letter to Mark W. Delahay, March 16, 1860. Basler, 4:32.

10. Fragment of a speech in 1858. Basler, 2:449.

11. To J. J. Crittenden, July 7, 1858. Basler, 2:484.

12. A letter dated November 25, 1851. Basler, 2:113.

cisely like so many fish upon a trot-line.”¹³ Speaking of the question of judicial authority in relation to Douglas he said he had turned the man’s own argument against Douglas, but, he added, “Even, turn it upon him — turn the sharp point against him, and gaff him through — he will still cling to it.”¹⁴ Cuttlefish did not inhabit the streams of Illinois, and when Lincoln accused Judge Douglas of “playing cuttlefish,” he made the identification unmistakable by spelling it out as “a small species of fish that has no mode of defending itself when pursued except by throwing out a black fluid, which makes the water so dark the enemy cannot see it and thus it escapes.”¹⁵

In an early letter Lincoln explained that he did not have anything against a certain official, but, he added, “we are entirely sure he is not *a winning card*.”¹⁶ Douglas he termed “a skilful gambler” who “will play for all the chances.”¹⁷ In Michigan in 1856, after describing the way “in which slavery is planted, and gains so firm a foothold,” he said, “I think this is a strong card that the Nebraska party have played, and won upon, in this game.”¹⁸ To August Belmont he wrote in 1862, “This government cannot much longer play a game in which it stakes all, and its enemies stake nothing.”¹⁹ And in the same year, touching difficulties in New Orleans, he said, “I shall not surrender this game leaving any available card unplayed.”²⁰ In a speech of 1856 he used the phrase “every man can make himself” and commented, “It has been said that such a race of prosperity has been run nowhere else.”²¹ His own backgrounds were in his mind when he remarked, “When

13. To Mary Speed, September 27, 1841. Basler, 1:260.

14. A speech at Springfield, 1858. Basler, 2:516.

15. From the fourth joint debate, at Charleston. Basler, 3:184.

16. The allusion, in a letter to Silas Noble, May 25, 1848, was to Judge McLean. Basler, 1:474.

17. Basler, 3:397.

18. The speech at Kalamazoo. Basler, 2:362.

19. Basler, 5:350.

20. Basler, 5:343.

21. Basler, 2:364.

one starts poor, as most do in the race of life. . . .”²² And in 1856 he said, “*Buchanan* is the hard horse to beat in this race.”²³ In a letter of the middle 1840’s, he tells General J. J. Hardin that he, the general, is “acting on the principle that the District is a horse which, the first jockey that can mount him, may whip and spur round and round, till jockey, or horse, or both, fall dead on the track.”²⁴ He never ceased to argue for a fair chance for all. In his first message to Congress, viewing the Civil War as “essentially a people’s contest,” he said, “On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men — to lift artificial weights from all shoulders — to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all — to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.”²⁵

Always fond of figures of speech having to do with ships, Lincoln employed them more and more during his presidency when he himself commanded the ship of state. In his first inaugural, declining to propose amendments to the Constitution, he said, “I am, rather, for the old ship, and the chart of the old pilots. If, however, the people desire a new, or an altered vessel, the matter is exclusively their own. . . .”²⁶ He had no love for citizens whose minds were neutral with respect to the issues of the war, and his irony hit them hard in 1862: “They are to touch neither a sail nor a pump, but to be merely passengers — dead-heads at that — to be carried snug and dry, throughout the storm, and safely landed right side up. Nay, more; even a mutineer is to go untouched lest these sacred passengers receive an accidental wound.”²⁷ Contemplating the possibility of his defeat for re-election in 1864, he said,

22. The New Haven speech. Basler, 4:24.

23. From the form letter to Fillmore men. Basler, 2:374.

24. Paul M. Angle, *New Letters and Papers of Lincoln*, 23 (Boston and New York, 1930).

25. Basler, 4:438.

26. Basler, 4:260.

27. To Cuthbert Bullitt, July 28, 1862. Basler, 5:345.

“I shall do my utmost that whoever is to hold the helm for the next voyage shall start with the best possible chance of saving the ship.”²⁸

STRAINS OF AN AMERICAN SYMPHONY

At every great turning point in the career of Lincoln — indeed every national crisis in which he was concerned — his words of appeal and challenge were buttressed with metaphors. From the days of his youth until his final address as President, delivered four days before he died, he consistently used imagery to infuse the “parts of speech” with vividness and concreteness. And it is evident that his power grew steadily with his experience and responsibility. Thus it is no chance circumstance that the addresses he delivered in the critical years just before the Civil War and during his presidency are illuminated by figures that time has woven into the American heritage. These figures, with perhaps a single exception, sprang from Lincoln’s mind. They were written by his pen and uttered by his voice. It is part of the glory of Lincoln’s words that they were in fact his, not the concoctions of ghost writers. The synthetic era when staffs of professional writers clothed the ideas and policies of high political leaders were still far in the future when Lincoln dedicated the battlefield of Gettysburg.

That part of the great “House Divided” speech at Springfield in 1858 which interested the entire country, according to Carl Sandburg, was its opening paragraph. What Lincoln said, in accepting the senatorial nomination, was “so plain that any two farmers fixing fences on a rainy morning could talk it over in all its ins and outs.”¹ And what he said was dramatized in imagery taken over

28. Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 433.

1. Sandburg, *Prairie Years*, 376.

from the words of Christ in the Gospel of Saint Matthew: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Americans have never forgotten the prophetic words with which Lincoln expounded the meaning of the figure: "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*. I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved* — I do not expect the house to *fall* — but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided. It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other."² As these words sped across the land in daily and weekly newspapers, the people of the country began to realize that a national leader was emerging on the Illinois prairies. Imagery bore the man to the people.

Douglas scolded Lincoln about the "House Divided" passage and heaped sarcasm upon it, but Lincoln blandly asked him if he believed that a house divided against itself could stand. If so, Lincoln good-humoredly suggested, there was "a question of veracity, not between him and me, but between the Judge and an authority of a somewhat higher character."³ In the same speech — in which Lincoln ridiculed the reasoning "by which a man can prove a horse-chestnut to be a chestnut horse" — he rejected the inference of Douglas that the house figure meant endorsement of a "dead uniformity."⁴ In America's "great variety" of local institutions Lincoln perceived, not "matters of discord," but the making of a house united, not divided.⁵ The house figure fascinated Lincoln, as it did his hearers, and he used it again and again with remorseless pertinacity. In a fragmentary note for a speech he jotted down yet another comment on Douglas: "He shirks the responsibility of pulling the house down, but he digs under it that it may fall of its own weight."⁶ Implying a concerted plan by Douglas and others

2. Basler, 2:461.

3. Basler, 3:17.

4. Basler, 3:16.

5. Basler, 3:17.

6. Basler, 3:205.

for slavery extension involving the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott decision, and popular sovereignty, Lincoln had employed a somewhat different "building figure" to its last closely fitting piece in the famous "House Divided" address. Framed timbers have been assembled by "Stephen, Franklin, Roger, and James" — obviously Douglas, Pierce, Taney, and Buchanan. They are joined together — they make the "frame of a house or a mill." The tenons and mortars fit. The pieces in length and proportion are "adapted to their respective places." There is "not a piece too many or too few." Or if one is missing, a "place in the frame" is "exactly fitted and prepared to yet bring such piece in." Against this elaborately contrived figure, Lincoln suggests the impossibility of believing "that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James" did not understand "one another from the beginning." Did they not all work upon "a common *plan* or *draft* drawn up before the first lick was struck?"⁷ The difficult problem of Douglas was to answer a piece of imagery that opened the way to devastating inferences. This was a figure of the most utilitarian kind.

The Cooper Institute Address, which Greeley called "the very best political address to which I ever listened," is noted in American history for its cogent analysis, economy of words, masterly persuasion, and a peroration of austere eloquence. There is no great amount of imagery in the address, but when the speaker used figures, he did so with his customary effectiveness. In this speech, referring to the judgment and feeling against slavery in America, he said, "You can scarcely scatter and disperse an army which has been formed into order in the face of your heaviest fire; but if you could, how much would you gain by forcing the sentiment which created it out of the peaceful channel of the ballot-box, into some other channel?"⁸ Calling for adherence to duty, he scorned "sophistical contrivances" such as "groping for some mid-

7. Basler, 2:465-66.

8. Basler, 3:542.

dle ground between the right and the wrong, vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man.”⁹ It was also in this closely reasoned New York speech, touching intimations that the South might not accept a Republican president, would destroy the Union, and then fasten the blame for its destruction upon the North, that he remarked, “That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, ‘Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!’”¹⁰ As this address spread across the country in a blaze of publicity, it was not only its tight-packed logic, but also the flavor of Lincoln’s individuality as conveyed by the figures, that won people over to belief in him as a leader of the nation in crisis.

The habits of a lifetime did not desert Lincoln when, at a grave moment in the nation’s life, he delivered his first inaugural address. The lasting fame of the closing lines has obscured certain other passages in which his ideas were conveyed through imagery. One occurs in that part of the address where Lincoln pointed out that the country could not remove its “respective sections from each other.” It could not “build an impassable wall between them.” This seemed clear enough, but Lincoln was not satisfied, and so he added, “A husband and a wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence, and beyond the reach of each other; but the different parts of our country cannot do this.”¹¹

Seward’s hand did indeed touch the peroration, but Lincoln’s imagination made its metaphor his very own, and no words of the address moved the people more deeply than the closing appeal for friendship: “Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and

9. Basler, 3:550.

10. Basler, 3:547.

11. Basler, 4:269.

hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”¹²

Figurative language finds its way many times into Lincoln’s messages to Congress. It was in the second of those messages — a message that ranks very high in Lincoln literature — that he said “*we* cannot escape history” and added, “The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.”¹³ And in 1864 he took account of the flow of migration from the Old World in these words, “I regard our emigrants as one of the principal replenishing streams which are appointed by Providence to repair the ravages of internal war. . . . All that is necessary is to secure the flow of that stream in its present fullness.”¹⁴

Exalted passages are many in the presidential years, but on occasions less formal than those of addresses and state papers, Lincoln found relief in phrases almost as famous as those in his greatest speeches. Among these is his request to Stanton to issue a commission in the Army. “I personally wish Jacob Freese, of New Jersey,” he wrote, “to be appointed colonel for a colored regiment, and this regardless of whether he can tell the exact shade of Julius Caesar’s hair.”¹⁵

The speech Lincoln thought would not “scour” is today familiar to every schoolboy, a prose poem opening with a majestic figure embracing the entire country, past and present, in its imaginative sweep. From first to last the imagery is there in phrases immortal — “our fathers brought forth,” “conceived in liberty,” “so conceived and so dedicated,” the “last full measure of devotion,” a “new birth of freedom.”¹⁶ And the imagery also glows, at its lumi-

12. Basler, 4:271. The precise changes made by Lincoln in adapting Seward’s phrases to his own use have been studied and analyzed by many scholars. A convenient summary is in the introduction to Basler, *Speeches and Writings*, 48.

13. Basler, 5:537.

14. The annual message to Congress, December 6, 1864. Basler, 8:141.

15. Stephenson, *Autobiography*, 386.

16. Basler, 7:23.

nous best, in the letter to Mrs. Bixby, which closes with the words: "the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom."¹⁷ Comforting Queen Victoria in an hour of sorrow, he wrote, "I know that the Divine hand that has wounded, is the only one that can heal."¹⁸

Quoting from the Second Inaugural is repeating strains from an American symphony known to all, but no appraisal of the Lincoln imagery would be complete if it failed to point out that it is the metaphors of that climactical address which sing in one's memory and lift the address to Olympian heights. Each side, said Lincoln, invokes God's aid "against the other." "It may seem strange that any man should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. . . . Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'The judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'¹⁹ He closes with the most eloquent passage in an American state paper, and at its heart is the phrase "to bind up the nation's wounds."

17. Basler, 8:117.

18. Basler, 5:118.

19. Basler, 8:333.

THE POWER OF PUTTING THINGS

When Lincoln took the oath of office a second time, he kissed the Bible at a passage in Isaiah that contained the words: "Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, their wheels like a whirlwind." In the imagery of Lincoln there were the sharp arrow, the bent bow, the beat of the hoof, the flint, and, if not the wheels of the whirlwind, at any rate the wings of an imagination. The passage was apposite to a mind which, in its unending and flexible imagery, was in command of the "parts of speech," consistently, but with advancing force, making language serve its needs with vividness and precision.

Great leadership, in the democratic world, is no trick of style, no device of words, no garment of rhetoric. It is mind and knowledge, character and experience, courage and devotion, oneness with the people, and a vision and imagination that rise above the "torment and the fray" of the passing hour. Man's character, as John Drinkwater says in the epilogue to his play *Abraham Lincoln*, endures and is a "token sent always to man for man's own government." No single facet of the mind of Lincoln can explain the man and his role in his own day — and his enduring fame. It is the whole man, in the amplitude of his mind and character, who met greatly the crisis of civil war and who lives greatly in the memory of America and the world. But we can help turn the legend of Lincoln into the living reality of the man by looking at the words with which he clothed his thought and conviction. And one of the sustaining sources of his power was his imagery, with its wide range and unmistakable flavor. While Lincoln was on his speaking trip in Connecticut in 1860, a Norwich minister, J. P. Gul-

liver, met him and told him that he had been impressed especially by the "illustrations" Lincoln used in his speech at the town hall the evening before. The illustrations were "romance and pathos and fun and logic all welded together." Gulliver then asked Lincoln to explain his power of "putting things." In his reply Lincoln said, "I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, till I have bounded it North, and bounded it South, and bounded it East, and bounded it West."¹ Thus even in explaining his method, he resorted to imagery — as, in things great and small, he had done across the years — and doing so, he fittingly ran the very gamut of the compass.



1. Luther E. Robinson, *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Letters*, 112 (Chicago, 1918). See also Carpenter, *Inner Life of Lincoln*, 308-17, which in turn draws upon the sketch by Gulliver in the *New York Independent* for September 1, 1864.



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